

NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued weekly. Subscription price \$2.50 per year. Entered as second class matter at the N. Y. Post Office by STREET & SMITH.

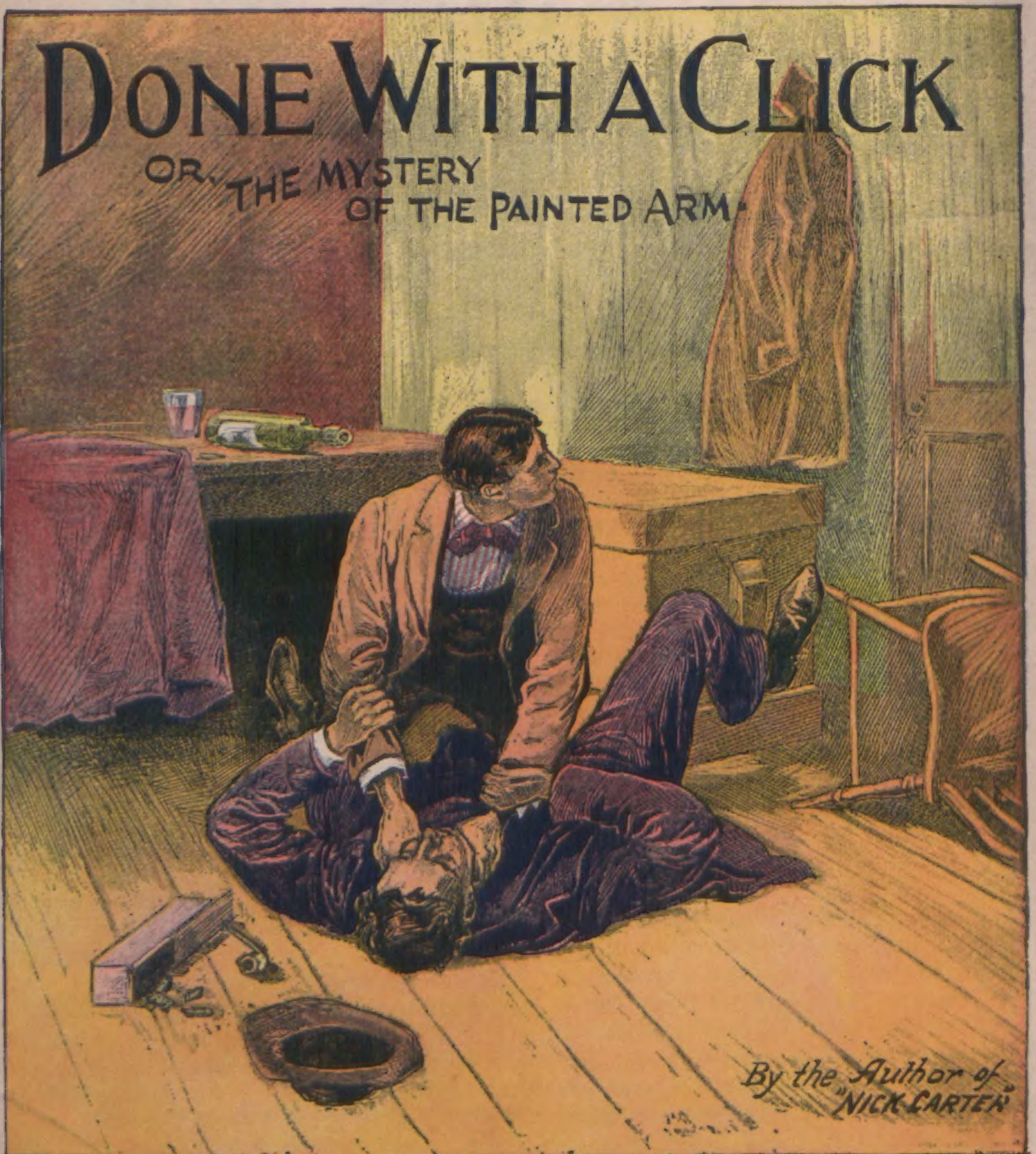
No. 225.

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DONE WITH A CLICK

OR, THE MYSTERY
OF THE PAINTED ARM.



By the Author of
"NICK CARTER"

HE SPRANG UPON THE ASTOUNDED RIVER PIRATE LIKE A PANTHER.

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*Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1901 by Street & Smith, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress,
Washington, D. C.*

*Entered as second class Matter at the New York, N. Y., Post Office.
Issued weekly. Subscription price, \$2.50 per year.*

April 20, 1901.

No. 225. STREET & SMITH, Publishers. NEW YORK. 238 William St., N. Y. 5 Cents.

DONE WITH A CLICK; OR, The Mystery of the Painted Arm.

By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

THE HUE AND CRY.

"Stop him!"

"Yes, if you can find him!"

"Ten dollars to know who he is!"

"It's worth it!"

"Twenty to get my grappling hooks on him!"

"If you made it fifty, Red Jeff, 'twouldn't fetch—the kid has vanished, neck and heels."

Red Jeff, ex-smuggler, ex-pirate, wharf rat, king of the river thieves of New York city, ground his teeth in rage.

"Call the boys!" he growled, hoarsely.

"They're coming," announced his companion.

"Line the river—the runaway made for cover that way."

Hot on the heels of the two men who had just dashed into view, four brawny fellows came forward, puffing and panting.

"Eye on him, governor?" inquired the foremost.

"Eye on nothing!" ground out Red Jeff. "He dodged around the corner here, and he's gone."

"Like a puff of smoke," put in his companion.

"Mates!" roared Red Jeff, "action!"

It's the snuggery broken up if that spy gets free—it's dodge and slurf, and finally come slap up against the beaks. In five years not a stranger has passed the threshold of our den, unchallenged, till this fellow did."

"He couldn't have been in the house five minutes."

"Two was enough for him."

"Eh?"

"To tumble over every scrap of writing, every bit of plunder we had in the secret room."

"That's bad!"

"Pretended to be a plumber's assistant, come to mend a leak. I found an envelope he had some solder in."

"Then you yelled——"

"And scared him into flight like the wind. Yell! so would you, for that envelope contained an address telling who he was from."

"Who?"

"Nick Carter."

A dead silence fell over the group. A rough, coarser set of faces could not well be gathered together, yet more than one paled under the bronze of exposure and the hardened recklessness of crime.

A spy, a detective, a representative of the man whom they feared personally more than the allied police powers of the

metropolis, had penetrated their secret haunt.

It must have been for a purpose—the last one of them was certain of that.

The shady, narrow street where their den fronted was of itself considered dangerous for any pedestrian who looked as if he possessed a dollar.

The only outsider who ever entered the doorway of the low groggery front of their haunt just at hand was some ignorant sailor who might better have stumbled into a den of tigers.

As to penetrating the crooked guarded labyrinth to the rear, whence Red Jeff and his cohorts had defied the police for years—from that the bravest city detectives had ever shrank.

Until now it had been as sacred from intrusion as a nest of rattlesnakes.

But now—not ten minutes since—a young fellow dressed as a mechanic, carrying a kit of plumber's tools, had swaggered into the place, letting its inmates believe that he was from the agent of the building.

Red Jeff had run across him two minutes later in a room, the door of which he had forced.

Red Jeff had found a trunk rifled, his coat pockets ransacked, a table drawer containing his limited correspondence all in disorder.

He was startled—not because twenty chests of tea stood piled up in that room, mute evidences of last night's foray of his gang on a China merchantman.

But because that very night, a few hours hence, was fixed as the occasion for "a big haul."

So big, in fact, so secret and unusual, that Red Jeff suspected that some outsider had got onto its details.

And as he discovered the envelope bearing the name of "Nick Carter," he knew it!

He was thrown completely off his balance by that enervating discovery.

The pretended plumber, the boy who "had come to mend a leak," had taken the alarm as a quick cry rang out.

He had turned and sprang upon the astounded river pirate like a panther.

There was a struggle in which nerve and agility outdid sheer muscular strength.

Flat to the floor went Red Jeff, upsetting a chair and half overturning the table, and at the racket, the man's yell for help, the rush of startled feet, the spry intruder sprang for a window, darted toward the river, and vanished.

The brawny giant glared now across the stretch of territory intervening between himself and the river.

A large transfer dock comprised it.

At one end of the wharf a steam scow was driving piles.

Beyond that a barge had just chuted its load of grain into an elevator.

Nearer were two buildings about a hundred and fifty feet apart.

One was four stories high, a storage warehouse; the other was a low shed-like building.

From the higher to the lower structure, set on trestles, ran what might be termed a freight toboggan slide.

Down this from a third story platform to that of the shed, a lot of boxes containing salted fish had been in progress of transportation for river reshipment.

All this Red Jeff took within the scope of an anxious, piercing glance.

"Hunt every crack and corner," he ordered. "We've got to get that spy!"

Four of his gang deployed toward the river. Red Jeff and his companion proceeded down the planking that marked a roadway.

They looked to the right and the left. Then Red Jeff gave a jump forward, as at a spot where a pile of bricks and a box of mortar stood a form came into view.

It was apparently that of one of the laborers employed in fixing a chimney of the warehouse.

He wore a well white-washed hat, lime streaked his clothing, and he carried a hod.

"It's him!" declared Red Jeff.

"You're crazy!" demurred his companion.

"What! slick hair under an old hat he's picked up—white collar for dress duty at mortaring? Oh, yes! Close in on him, quiet, now!"

The river pirate almost whispered the word, and with cat-like tread, started after the leisurely proceeding form ahead.

The latter never turned if he heard,

never betrayed so much as a quiver if he suspected.

But just as four claw-like hands went out not two feet behind him he gave a spring that was half a whirl.

He kept whirling and spinning around like a top, the hod suddenly outstretched spinning with him.

It was a fearful weapon, for as it struck Red Jeff's companion the latter went flat with a slam.

Red Jeff himself dodged. One corner of the hod grazed his shoulder. He grabbed out, held on, and its wielder letting go went back tumbling.

"After him!" yelled the river pirate.

His comrade was nursing a broken head and groaning, and Jeff bounded forward alone.

The fugitive saw him coming. His hat was off now, his face disclosed.

His actions had already betrayed him as the late intruder at the den.

A sight of his face completely convinced Jeff on this score anew.

And, in the light of his knowledge that here was one of the dreaded Nick Carter's allies, the river thief discerned a clear eye, a firm lip, a menacing something, that, boy though he evidently was, he was to be feared in his reckless enthusiasm and resolute courage far more than any snag he had yet run up against in all his busy criminal career.

The boy put for the river straight. Red Jeff uttered a shout as he made out two of his men at the dock edge.

They turned, saw the fugitive, and darted forward to intercept him.

It seemed as if the latter was now in a trap, for the three were closing in on him.

He halted abruptly, wavered, shot a quick glance in every direction, and then sprang to a stationary ladder running up the side of the warehouse.

It ended at the platform three stories up, and the climber got there as promptly as if he had possessed wings.

Red Jeff sprang up it after him. The boy picked up a hooked pole with which the boxes were shunted down the slide.

At first it seemed as if he was going to use this as a weapon.

Then seeing that no outsiders were in the immediate vicinity upon whom he

could rely for assistance or protection, if needed, he sought to evade an unequal contest, for all three men were now coming up the ladder.

The platform and the slide were smooth as glass. Both were waxed, and a mere touch moved a box as if rolling over ice.

The fugitive pushed one to the edge of the slide, sprang upon it, directed a swift glance at his pursuers, and then raising the hooked pole, drove it clear through the cover of the box.

He had now something more than a vehicle to shunt him one hundred and fifty feet from his enemies with a bird's swiftness.

The fixed pole was a mast to cling to—a stay, a support.

With a whir and a swish the box tilted down the incline, made a shoot that took the rider's breath away.

The daring adventurer never looked behind. The vivid rush of air drove his hair back from his face like floating ribbons, and he could see clearly.

Then perhaps fifty feet accomplished, as he saw something he had not anticipated, his keen face took a sudden token of alarm.

He discerned why work had been temporarily suspended in transporting the boxes.

Where the slide made a slight curve to break the velocity of descending objects and to strike the receiving platform below just right, a sideboard was out of place.

The sharp contact of the corner of some box had shattered it awry—he could see the wreck of both in the yard below.

Would he graze it?—whir! Could he evade a fearful tumble?—whiz!

Over the break, from solid planking to a cushion of air, the box leaped before its passenger could think.

He was aimed for the ground now. He let go the pole as it began to turn, he gave a side twist to his supple body as the box wobbled and slid out from under his feet.

Luck favored him. As the box crashed apart with a terrific noise, his feet came squarely down into a nest of excelsior, lying where it had been dumped from some pottery-packed hogsheads and crates.

Notwithstanding this, a dizzying shock accompanied the sudden stoppage, and for a second or two the fugitive was dazed.

He was now about sixty feet from the river. He made toward it as he saw the lowermost fellow on the ladder nailed to the warehouse drop sheer to the ground, and his companion still higher up follow his example.

They blocked escape streetward. To the boy's right was the steam scow, but coming from that direction was another of Red Jeff's cohorts.

Hemmed in, the fugitive made a desperate bolt forward, and coming to where a lot of piles had been driven, jumped to the first clump.

Others were being set in place, and the derrick operated from the scow was but a few yards away.

The boy's idea seemed to be to reach the water's edge, and trust to a dive or a swim to the shelter of numberless craft anchored near at hand.

He sprang from one cluster of piles to another, then to a third, and barely missed landing in the soft mud beneath the fourth, as fierce yells pursued him.

He turned to study out the proximity of his enemies, and this distracted his full attention as he made another jump.

This time he landed on a single log end, to find himself cased between the grooved sides of the pile-driver.

It was the last log. Below the water lay. He eagerly scanned the prospect.

There was a grain barge moored near the elevator thirty feet down shore, out a farther distance a coal scow was floating past.

A frightful yell rather halted, than urged the boy forward.

It seemed to bear a new and terrific import that dazed him somewhat.

It did not proceed from any of his enemies. They had halted in various stages of progress from ladder to logs, stockstill and spellbound, and he could not exactly understand it.

The cry came from a man farther down the dock.

His eyes, fixed on the fugitive, were fairly starting from their sockets.

He was waving his arms in a wild, hysterical way, and was so excited that

his cries were the merest incoherent babblings.

"Take care!" the fugitive made out.

He wavered, wondering if the menace outlined hovered behind or below.

Then he looked up quickly as a sharp snap echoed forth.

He seemed instantly to shrink and fall, without nerve or power to control himself.

Both were paralyzed by an awful threat let loose at that second.

The engineer on the steam scow had released the hook that held the iron pile-driving weight into its grooves.

Down these the half-ton bulk of metal shot with the velocity of lightning.

Sweeping and crushing all before it, the immense hammer head landed on the top of the log.

CHAPTER II.

"IN TOUCH."

"Wiped out!" shouted Red Jeff.

"Squelched—mincemeat!" interlarded the man nearest to him, aghast.

The workman who had so agitatedly hailed the fugitive came forward, pale and unsteady.

"That—boy——" he gasped.

"Yes, we saw him," nodded Jeff.

"Didn't——" chattered the man.

"Didn't what?"

"Get crushed—by pile-driver."

"Nonsense!"

"See, now!"

The huge hammer began to ascend—the top of the log was revealed.

"Told you so—I saw him fall," continued the workman.

"Fall, where? Quick, man! He's got free after all, boys!"

"Over the log, as the hammer came down——"

"Yes! yes!"

"And into the water—splash!"

"Fish him out—hunt him out!" shouted Red Jeff.

All three of the pirate crowd began jumping across the piles.

From the top of the one farthest out their leader eagerly scanned the surface of the river.

Some ripples showed. Floating away gently was a hat, the one the fugitive had worn.

Steadily and ravenously, like some gloating fishhawk, Red Jeff kept his eyes fixed on the water.

"Went down—hasn't come up," he pronounced after a spell. "As good a way as the other. Let the police find him if he's missed. Come on, mates."

"We're safe now?" insinuated one of the men.

"For what he may have found out, yes; from any other spy ever fooling us—oh, just!" responded Jeff, with unction. "This one bothered me. He must have been after——"

"To-night's big game?"

"What else?"

The trio made their way back to land.

They halted to take up their battered companion, and soon disappeared in the direction of their den.

"That," observed Bob Ferret, "was a close shave!"

Bob Ferret was the name of the member of Nick Carter's detective school who had penetrated the lair of the harbor thieves.

He was not lying cold and stark under the waters of the river, as his late pursuers believed and presumably hoped, but, quite cozy, though dripping, from a decided point of vantage he was quietly taking in the last exciting section of his afternoon's venture.

When he went over from the top of the log just in time to escape annihilation from the descending iron sledge, the cold water acted on his energies, momentarily paralyzed by horror, like a spur.

Bob swam to where a flapping, box-like piece of canvas extended from one of the elevator chutes.

It lay over the dock just as it had been removed from the hold of the barge a few yards distant.

Bob climbed up, seized it, and pulled himself into it by means of a creasing clutch.

Then reaching the point where the fixed scoops rounded on a belt, he had something to cling to.

He drew his feet up, and watched dock and river through a slit in the canvas.

"Good thing those fellows didn't loiter!" he soliloquized, straightening out his cramped limbs as they disappeared and so creeping down as to land

on the dock. "Now then, to take a breathing spell and cast up accounts."

Bob had a queer method of following out this procedure, for it entailed a brisk run.

He got out of the vicinity and out of the district without attracting attention.

When he halted, it was in a stable yard back of a modest little house that looked like the home of some teamster or cabman.

On the back steps, sunning himself, was a bright-faced, neat appearing young fellow about Bob's own age.

"Hello, Bob!" he spoke, with a keen stare at his friend's lime-streaked, water-sogged attire.

"Hello, Buff!" the new arrival hailed back.

Buff was a recent addition to Nick Carter's detective household.

Bob had the reputation of being the shrewdest and most successful juvenile in the school, but Buff was fast following in his footsteps.

Employed by the veteran thief-catcher to carry messages, Buff had been of the most brilliant service in several recent cases, and Nick, discerning in him a genuine diamond in the rough, had taken him professionally under his wing.

"I see you've been up to something," remarked Buff, as Bob took off his coat and hung it on a convenient clothes-line.

"Slightly!"

"You don't mean to say you've ventured into the lion's den?"

"I did."

"Any good?"

"This good," responded Bob, with vigor—"Mr. Carter is right; Red Jeff is up to some big game."

"To-night?"

"Yes, that I have found out positively. You know we complained of getting rusty yesterday morning because there seemed nothing to run down, no work to do, and how Mr. Carter said he had happened across a little pointer that might keep us in practice?"

Buff nodded assentingly.

"In his wonderful way of picking up all kinds of tips, Mr. Carter heard that Red Jeff was up to something out of the ordinary. He said it would be a great thing to run the fellow down on general

principles, for he was the pest of the merchant marine, but to bag him on some sure outside crime would be a decided feather in our caps. We laid our plans here," and Bob glanced about the yard.

"Then, a couple of hours since, I got one of my restless fits on——"

"And went up to Red Jeff's hang out?"

"Up to it, happened to hear the bartender refer to a leak in a water pipe, made for a plumber's outfit, and—I had five minutes of it only, and a narrow graze in getting away, but I got something."

"What?" interrogated Buff, eagerly.

"This."

Bob unrolled a wet and wadded strip of paper.

"A letter to Red Jeff, dated this morning," he explained, "with signature torn off. Listen: 'I send the thousand. Duplicate same, if you make a successful run of it.'"

"That sounds promising," commented Buff.

"Promising! It's no cheap penny game, the one Red Jeff is up to, and I believe Mr. Carter knew it when he started us out. This isn't in the junk line, I can tell you! Thousand-dollar offers come from people of importance, and they don't pay that amount except for a big heap of work, either."

"That's so, Bob, and you propose——"

"Our original plan."

"To utilize the heavy wagon of our friend, the teamster, here?"

"Exactly."

"He's ready to accommodate us."

"Good! Here's the layout, Buff—Red Jeff is up to some big scheme. He and his men are priming up to start off on it this evening. It's so big that two thousand dollars' pay is involved. That much we know. Now, then, we want to know more."

"By getting posted just as near them this evening as we can."

"It's the only way. There are a dozen blind exits from the street, where these pirates hang out, and to venture into it even after dark is worth a fellow's life."

"Your visit will put them even more on guard."

"Of course. We can make a shadow only under particularly favorable circum-

stances. I'm going home to get some dry clothes on. Meet me here at five."

"And tell the teamster he's wanted?"

"Certainly. Engage him. Let there be no miss as to time or place."

"Oh, he'll do his share. I did him a great favor once, and he hasn't forgotten it," declared Buff.

The two young detectives parted, but it was too meet again promptly at the hour agreed upon.

Bob arrived, to find Buff on hand. He was talking with a cheery-voiced teamster, who nodded pleasantly to Bob.

"All ready?" inquired the latter.

"There we are!" was the driver's answer.

Two horses were attached to a heavy box wagon.

It seemed heaped up full and high with cinders.

As the man slipped a slide in the side, however, a false bottom and ample empty space was revealed.

"That will do," commented Bob.

"You know the place?"

"Like my own yard," replied the driver. "Right against the side, you want to land?"

"Just where I told you."

"Get in."

Bob crept through the aperture. Buff came after him, closing it, and the team started up.

A little loop-hole was afforded where a bolt had come out, and Bob kept track of their progress by peering through this.

He was all attention to detail, as they lined the docks where he had gone through such exciting exploits earlier in the day.

Then the wagon proceeded down the unsavory thoroughfare where the den of the king of the river pirates was located.

Every other house was a saloon, and low-browed, villainous-looking fellows loitered in doorways or promenaded the narrow pavements.

By the side of the haunt that Bob had visited ran a narrow alley cutting through windingly to the next street.

As they entered it, Bob braced himself, and Buff spread out both hands to preserve a needed balance.

"Take care!" warned Bob.

"I'm steady!" asserted Buff.

Crash!

Bob knew that the critical moment arriving had found the driver ready.

The hind right side wheel had smashed off at the hub, just as it had been arranged that it should.

Somewhat in the fashion that the ancients were wont to plant their movable forts in front of the castles of their enemies, Bob had devised the present plan to plant himself not two feet away from a window looking into Red Jeff's lair.

The driver had fixed the wheel for just the present catastrophe, had operated a wire, disconnected a bar just at the right time, and now leaping to the ground, he looked the dismayed victim of a genuine breakdown.

Of course a crowd gathered. Eagerness died away on the part of many, however, as they saw nothing worth stealing about the wagon.

Then the man who ran the bar in Red Jeff's place came out to inspect the breakdown.

"See here, my man," Bob heard the driver say, "I'm going to ask you a favor."

"That so?"

"Just. First, I want to set up the cigars for all in the house."

"That's business!"

"And leave my wagon here till morning."

"Why not?"

"You see, I couldn't get a wheel here before dark. I'll have it out of your way by sunrise, though."

"Oh! that's all right."

The driver went in to pay for the cigars, came out, unhitched the horses and started away.

"Fixed right?" queried Buff, in a whisper to his companion, who had his eye glued to the little port-hole.

"Couldn't be better."

"Good!"

"We're not two feet away from a window, and our side slide opens right on it."

"Can you look in?"

"Perfectly."

"Is our man there?"

"Our man and our men—all hands."

"Now then," spoke Buff, eagerly, "to watch and wait!"

"Now then," supplemented Bob, promptly, "to work and win!"

CHAPTER III.

THE REVOLVING ROOM.

"Be cautious, Bob!"

"Yes, Buff, we mustn't lose what we've gained by any false break now."

It was exactly three hours after Nick Carter's young detectives had so cleverly camped in a successful and unique way right on the trail of the harbor thieves.

They had been so near to a little ceiling window looking into the den of the river thieves that they had been able to see everything going on.

When it had been casually hooked back to give ventilation, they had heard nearly every word spoken.

Those words had been enlightening, for they told the eager listeners that at precisely ten o'clock picked members of Red Jeff's gang were going by water to earn two thousand dollars by a few hours' work.

Those words had been stimulating, for as the crowd retired from the room under inspection to repair to some secret lair far to the rear, Bob had insisted on creeping through that little window and following them up.

"They may slip out any one of a dozen secret exits, and all our work will be for nothing," he declared.

"You hope to keep with them?" inquired Buff.

"I want to, see how and where they start from," answered Bob. "If we can't do that we're left, aren't we?"

"I guess you're right, Bob, but we're diving into a nest of pitfalls."

"All in the line of detective duty," observed Bob tersely. "One miss and they're off, and the job's done, tracks covered up, and mystery too deep for us to follow. Come on."

Buff was willing to go anywhere with Bob. He went in through the window after him.

In front was the bar—they had no business in that direction.

Bob took the lead. They opened a door to the rear and crossed a bare apartment.

A second was cautiously reconnoitred and entered. "This is the room where Red Jeff discovered me," whispered Bob.

"And here's a queer door—built round," reported Buff.

"I noticed it to-day," said Bob, coming up and feeling over its half-circular surface.

The dimmest kind of light came in at the windows. Bob located a catch, opened the door and stepped ahead.

Buff followed him. Then two things happened in rapid succession quite startling in themselves.

The door behind them closed with a slam—evidently a stout spring operated it—the boys had not proceeded five steps before they came to a forced halt.

"Why! what are we in, anyway?" breathed Bob—"a closet?"

"No, Bob, it's a trap, a cage!"

"Nonsense!"

"Feel the bottom with your feet."

"Hollow-sounding, yes."

"Feel the sides, rounding and smooth. We're in a sheet iron cylinder."

"Maybe its an elevator. No. Why, I see what it is, look here—a revolving room!"

Bob drew from his pocket a tiny vial and removed its cork.

That was his special dark lantern. It took up no space, it was simple, and he could control its rays.

The minute air was admitted the little lump of phosphorus it contained, soaked in sweet oil, gave out a soft gentle glow.

Guiding the light, Bob verified a discovery he had guessed at before.

They were indeed in a cylinder. It was set on a pivot in a bricked up space, and reaching through its open doorway and pushing, Bob found that it revolved with them.

"Don't you see?" he interrogated. "We slide around till we reach a corresponding doorway on the opposite side."

"Do we?" murmured Buff, dubiously.

"Certainly. Clever device! No one can get through from the front to the back unless the opening in this is opposite the doorway. 'The deuce!'"

"I should say so!"

"We're fixed!"

"Badly."

The conviction came simultaneously to both venturesome explorers.

It was enforced by a sudden halt of the

revolving room, accompanied by a distinct grating jar.

Bob pressed on the brick work one way, then the other way.

"Locked!" he reported.

"Locked!" echoed Buff, grimly.

"Some catch ahead of us. I can half understand it," muttered Bob.

"Can you?" questioned Buff.

"Yes. We should have pushed the cylinder around and unset the lock on its outside before we started. That's the knowing way of it, must be. You're right, it's a trap—for the unwary."

Bob shied the feeble rays aloft—solid. He tapped at the brickwork front two inches away—solid, too.

"I don't ever remember being in quite so tight a box before," he observed.

"What's bothering me, is that those fellows will get away on their scheme," complained Buff.

"Oh! we'll be brought to light long before they start," promised Bob.

"And then?"

Bob hunched his shoulders philosophically.

He did not give up entirely until he had spent fully an hour working to get the cylinder revolving again, the bricks in the wall loose, a seam in the bottom widened.

It was all of no avail, and he had just made up his mind that this was a barrier set against entrance to the front till the next morning, when voices sounded, then footsteps, and then the revolving room began its tour again.

"Pnsh—hold back the way we came!" whispered Bob, energetically.

He and Buff bruised and jammed their fingers trying it—a steady force had unlocked and was hauling the cylinder around the way they did not wish to go.

"Is it fight, Bob?" interrogated Buff.

"To the death, or get killed," answered Bob, grimly.

The cylinder edge past the new doorway and light began to flood it.

Before it had fully crossed the fitting opening space, however, a startled warning utterance rang out.

Just a flashing view six or eight men got of the two sturdily planted young detectives, bright weapons extended.

Just a mere glimpse that twain was

afforded of grouped enemies, only now aware of their proximity.

Then the cylinder was sent whirling.

For all the world like squirrels in a drum cage, the boys spun around and around.

Then came a jerk back, forward, and back again, carrying them off their feet, slamming them against the iron walls and over one another.

Bob saw what was intended. The pirates were employing these tactics of constant gyrating motion to dizzy, unnerve and drive them off their balance.

"Buff," he spoke quickly, "sit down."

"I'm flopped!" came the prompt response.

"Every time we pass the doorway where those fellows are grouped——"

"Yes."

"Fire!"

"I see."

Bang—bang!

It was like shooting at a flashlight, so fitting was the passage of the open space.

Around again, two more reports, and cries of dismay ensued and the cage began to go slower.

"Dive!" breathed Bob, "before they push again or lock."

"Back into the front?"

"Of course."

"Made it!"

"Out of the way!"

"Why, Bob——"

Crash!

Both the boys had executed a really clever piece of gymnastics, for they bounded from the revolving room into the one they had recently left like rubber balls and never grazed a hair.

Bob, however, added a new laurel to the exploit.

On his feet in an instant, brushing Buff unceremoniously aside, he made a dive for a low, narrow settee.

As the doorway of the revolving room came around again, nearly on its last spin now, he gave the piece of furniture a jerk and a push.

It shot squarely through the aperture they had just cleared, half in, half out of it.

With a shock the cylinder grated to a halt.

"Blocked, locked, barricaded!" announced Bob, rather exultantly.

"They can't get after us."

"Not through that revolving room—they can't even budge it now."

"They may have some other way!"

"Dozens of them, probably, so back to the wagon. Hello!"

"A signal!"

"Sounds like it—in the front bar. Quick, Buff! Well?"

Dodging across the room to open its opposite door and make tracks the way they had come, Bob halted very sharply.

Just as he touched the knob, the door jarrd.

At that very instant heavy bolts top and bottom were shot into place on its other side.

"They've telegraphed their friends in front——" began Bob.

"And we're shut in," nodded Buff.

"What now, Bob?"

"The windows."

"Not that way—look out first."

"Pshaw!"

Bob drew back. They were a well drilled set in this den of crime, it seemed for under each of the ally windows of the room as many men were already posted in an attitude of vigilance and expectancy.

On three sides the apartment was now surrounded or barricaded.

Naturally the young detectives made for the sole direction from which danger had not challenged.

A door yielded to a touch. Across a dark room Bob proceeded to reach a second door, but this one was secured.

Tramping footsteps and noisy voices suddenly filled the air all around them.

"This room is no better than the other one——" began Buff.

"Unless we can hide."

"Here's a bed."

"Creep under it."

"There is no under."

"How's that?" spoke Bob, gliding to his comrade's side. "Oh, a folding bed, spring, blankets. Under them! some one is certainly coming."

The springs jangled as the boys piled upon them.

"Pull the blankets over you," directed Bob, "but keep your weapon ready—eh? what's the matter?"

Buff was punching Bob warningly, his lips swept Bob's ear to whisper cautiously:

"Some one in the room!"

"I guess not."

"Some one slid off the bed as we landed on it!"

"Are you sure?"

"Listen."

It was a palpitating moment. Bob had an ear like an Indian. He caught a stealthy, gliding rustle.

"Slip off the bed—you on one side, me on the other," he directed.

"It's too late!"

"It's lifting!"

Flop!

At the bottom the bed was suddenly seized by an unknown lurker in the room.

From its bottom the bed shot up and shut up.

Knocked one over the other, and unable to get out, the two young detectives were brought to a halt, flattened out as if in a squeezing press.

It was, indeed, a folding bed, and it had folded them helpless, like two herrings packed in a box.

Squeezed and half smothered, the boys wriggled and panted.

Then they crept with a new suspense, for through the room they were in there grated forth a mocking, triumphant laugh.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TIMELY BULLET.

Bob had been thrown with his body slightly crossing the bed.

Buff was nearly doubled up, head down.

The bed had not been locked, the bulge of their bodies preventing this, but whoever had shut them in stood braced against it, holding it in place.

The captives felt the pressure reduced as they wriggled, but only for a moment.

Before they could push out two inches the man was back in place, having lit the gas and bounded again into position.

Now he began blowing on some kind of a queer whistle that sounded like saw filing.

For well on to two minutes he kept this up. Then a door banged open, and

Bob heard a voice that kind of thrilled him.

"Well, what's the racket for?" propounded Red Jeff's gruff tones.

"Got 'em!"

"Got who?"

"Two fellows—spies."

"Glorious! I was shaking in my boots. Feared they'd slipped us. I said, 'Are they raining down? Is the place a sieve, suddenly letting in all kinds of varmints! You've got them—where?'"

"In the bed."

"Eh?"

"Shut up in it. Take care! They're spry. They'll pop out like jacks in a box."

"One on each side," directed Jeff, and Bob surmised that he had not entered the room alone, as two pairs of heavy feet crossed the floor. "In there, you two!" continued the pirate, raising his voice—"I fire if you so much as lift a finger. Now, then, lower slowly."

The pressure was relieved. Buff's feet flopped over somersault fashion, and he rolled out of the interstice despite himself.

Bob, more erect, clinched his weapon firmly, but a groping arm slid over him and clutched his wrist in a grasp like steel.

Then he was snaked out rudely, the weapon was torn from his grasp, and he was flung against the wall in a corner where his disarmed comrade was just getting to his feet.

Red Jeff glared at them, first curiously, and then with a sanguinary snarl as his eyes studied Bob's features.

"He didn't drown!" he voiced—"look, who's that?"

"Why!" declared the man who had shut up the bed—and Bob noticed that his head was bandaged up, and that he was the fellow he had struck with the hod in the shipping yard—"it's the kid who banged me to-day!"

"Yes, the one from Nick Carter! Hold on a bit, mates!"

The two men who had yanked the two boys out of the folding bed, great iron-framed fellows, sprang forward as their leader pronounced the name of the hated veteran detective.

There was murder in their eyes—both

boys read that. That sharp command checked a crushing assault on the captives.

"Yes, hold a bit," put in the man wearing the bandage. "Them's my game. Why not? I owe one of them this broken head, I caught both. Jeff, they're mine!"

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean!" repeated the fellow gratingly. "Ay! what don't I mean? You two lead those fellows into the next room and watch them a bit. Then I've something to say to them in private."

Bob and Buff were hustled through a doorway until now hidden by a curtain.

Their guardians penned them into an alcove, barricaded it by seating themselves and crossing their feet, never taking their eyes off them.

Bob kept his ears open.

He caught occasional fragmentary sentences from the adjoining apartment.

Red Jeff and his injured lieutenant were discussing the chances of there being any more prowlers about the place.

Some one was signaled and sent to make a scour of the entire square and its vicinity.

Then the colloquy became more animated and less guarded.

"You don't drop to-night's job for this break?" Bob distinctly heard the man he had hit with the hod say.

"Not for twenty Nick Carters!" declared Jeff. "With another thousand waiting? Hardly!"

"Got to be cautious."

"I'm always that."

"Yes, but extra this time. Jeff, we'd better take a country vacation to-morrow, till we see things simmer down hereabouts."

"Well, we can afford it, can't we? There's a start in the big yawl Susan down at Murphy's dock, a ship at mock quarantine down the bay to visit, a box to get, a row to make, a stowing in one of our wharf tunnels and we're through. As to the two-fellows in yonder—"

"Jeff!" spoke stern, steady accents that made Bob guess they had fallen into the hardest kind of luck, "when you come back don't ask me where they are."

"I needn't know, eh?"

"And no one else will ever find out."

"Settled!" whispered Buff across to his companion.

"It looks it," nodded Bob.

There was no light in the room except that which came in through the curtains.

At one side was a stove, and a roasting hot fire in it, but it was shut up, and only a few stray glints came from it.

Besides this, some clothing spread out on two chairs before it as if to dry shut in the front of the stove.

Red Jeff's lieutenant came into the room abruptly. He lit the gas, and sat down on a stool near the stove, which was between the boys and the doorway.

"Tie their hands behind them," he ordered the two men.

Some stout cord was wrapped around the wrists of each of the captives.

"Put one in that corner of the alcove, the other opposite."

This also was done. The man with the bandaged head made a gesture to the two men, and they slouched into the next room and out of it.

"Now for a pleasant evening," spoke Red Jeff's lieutenant. "I can't join in the fun of a sail, so we'll have some sport at home. First, who are you two?"

An iron bar used as a poker lay by the stove.

This the man took up. He weighted it, he felt of it, he clinched it ominously as he fixed lurid, savage eyes on the captives.

Bob noticed that near at hand was his revolver.

Its muzzle protruded from the pocket of the man's coat, which hung smoking on the chair at his side.

Bob had knocked him into a puddle of mud when he struck him with the hod, and the garment had been sponged and hung up to dry.

"Nothing to say," growled the fellow, grating his teeth as Bob and Buff eyed him steadily in silence. "Well, I'll tell you who are you—two of Nick Carter's precious brats!"

"Let it go at that, if it suits you," observed Bob, coolly.

"It goes. I just wanted to know so as to tab you. We've got a private cemetery hereabouts."

"Have you?" muttered Bob.

"For a fact. There's two spaces wait-

ing. You'll be labelled before morning. Show up, tell if this is only an accidental venture of hair-brained, would-be cop-pers, and maybe—maybe, I say—we might consent to give you a twelve-month forced cruise to Australia to cool your blood and make you forget us."

"Nothing to say," retorted Bob, tranquilly.

"Nothing to say," echoed Buff, with unwavering vim.

"You haven't! Then I have!"

The man lashed himself into a fury by kicking the stool from under him and brandishing the iron bar.

There was no doubt of his purpose—he shrank no more from putting two troublesome intruders out of his way than he would brushing two gnats aside.

Bob steadied himself, and Buff, taking his dauntless comrade as the prime model of the age, squared back quite as unflinchingly.

"Look out—I'm coming!"

The man crouched back as if for a spring—that horrible, heavy bar uplifted.

Bob counted the seconds—he felt that he was in the closest corner of his life.

Just as the fellow broke his vicious pose for forward progress, there was a flare, a puff, a loud report.

His spring changed to a whirl, the iron bar went crashing to the floor, and after it, without so much as a groan, he sank a prostrate, inert heap.

Bob stared. Buff thrilled.

The former tried to take in the situation, found its key, and sprang forward to the side of the prostrate ruffian.

"Quick," he called to the puzzled Buff.

"Quick, what?"

"Back to me! Be nimble. You have the free use of your fingers?"

"Tied only at the wrists."

"Unloose the cords about mine."

Bob stood with one foot lifted, as if to crush to silence the man at his feet should he rouse up.

Buff fumbled at the cords about his comrade's wrists at a disadvantage, but got them loose just as a door was heard to open in the next room.

"Hey, you, lieutenant!" rang out a challenging voice.

Bob held his breath and looked at Buff.

"Too bad!" he muttered. "Don't move, don't speak," whispered Buff. "I'll try it."

"Try what?"

Buff was a superb mimic. In a recent case triumphantly won at every point, his ventriloquial powers had enabled him to pass one of its most critical crisis.

Now, in perfect imitation of the guff, harsh tones of the voice of the "leftenant," he demanded:

"Well?"

"Cap'n wants to know if anything's wrong?"

"Course not. Tell him I scare before I kill."

"Ay! ay!"

"Bob!" exploded Buff, in a vast breath of mingled relief and wonder as the man withdrew from the next room, "who fired?"

"This!"

Bob reached over and dragged from the coat smoking before the stove its protruding revolver.

"Feel," he directed, pressing the weapon across Buff's hands.

The cartridge chambers were almost too hot to touch.

"The fire fired it!"

"What else? Mr. Carter has a record of a dozen cases of this kind; sun's rays, electricity, common fire. A miracle has interfered in our behalf, Buff. We were never nearer facing death."

"Is the man dead?"

Bob released his comrade's hands. Then he stooped and made a speedy examination of the motionless body.

"A bad ridge along the skull, only stunning, though, I fancy," he reported. "We can't stop to nurse him."

"Hardly, in view of his kindly intentions toward ourselves!"

"Creep into the next room and the next beyond, Buff, softly now, and see if the ally is still guarded.

Buff glided away and promptly came back with a whispered:

"All clear."

Bob recovered their weapons from whence they had been tossed on a couch.

They entered the room looking out on the side lane of the den.

Softly Bob raised the window, peered out and then along the opposite side of the street.

"Ready for a bolt!" he ordered.

"Never more welcome!" declared Buff. "Now for home and reinforcements to nail this murderous gang, I suppose?"

"Not a bit of it!" dissented Bob, strenuously—"now for Murphy's dock, the yawl Susan, and a close shadow of the water trail of Red Jeff's two thousand dollar scheme!"

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERIOUS BOX.

A dash across the street like flitting shadows, a dive down a narrow space between two buildings, and unperceived, unseen, Nick Carter's young detectives were free of the dangers that had encompassed them for the preceding two hours.

Bob made for the river, straight. He questioned two officers he met, gave a boy strolling by a dime to answer some questions, and lined the wharves with steady confidence.

"There it is," he announced to Buff, as they crossed a little dock piled with tanbark at the edge of which rocked a good-sized yawl.

Fore and aft were covered spaces, as if for secret stowage. It held four pairs of oars.

"S-U-S-A-N" spelled Buff, as a glint of light caught the labelled stern.

"This is Murphy's dock."

"Yes," assented Bob.

"And this is the Susan, so——"

"Find out the safest place to hide in."

"You're going with them, Bob?"

"Is there any other way to keep track of them?"

"I'm with you!"

Bob decided on the space under the bow as a place less likely to be disturbed than the stern, for the latter held tarpaulins, ropes and other stuff often used in a voyage.

There was ample room for stowing and stretching themselves, and making sure that no one was watching them in the vicinity, Bob and Buff went into retirement.

They had come just in time, it seemed,

for in less than ten minutes four men arrived, got into the boat, took up the oars, and started down the river.

From their voices Bob was enabled to guess that Red Jeff was not among them.

From bits of their conversation overheard as they progressed, he soon learned that the king of the harbor pirates was in waiting at one of their "wharf tunnels" ready to receive their cargo when they returned.

The night had set in misty and with the air full of fog. Bob's chance to peer was limited, and he had to guess out the course the yawl was taking.

It passed the Battery, went down the bay, and after two hours' rowing slowed up slightly.

Then it grazed some object, apparently the side of a ship, was halted there, and Bob could see a yellow lantern among the rigging of quite a large vessel.

Not a word had been spoken by the rowers for some time, but one of them, in a suppressed voice, now directed:

"Signal, Bill."

A low, peculiar whistle sounded out. Then the boat rocked, as over the side of the vessel a form came down a rope.

"Who is it?" inquired the new arrival, trying to scan the faces of the rowers.

"The Susan—Red Jeff—come for a cargo."

"Quite correct. It's all ready, boys. Make your yawl steady, lower and come below and have a bracer for a hard night's work."

"Not much time to waste, cap'en."

"Oh! no one will trouble you. Why," half laughed the speaker, "I worked the game of my mate down with the yellow fever so that all three passengers I didn't want in the way payed handsomely to be landed down the coast. The plague ship racket, the yellow lantern, keeps all meddlers at safe bay, and this fog will cover box and boat like a shroud going back."

The yawl was secured by ropes to the side of the vessel, fore and aft.

Two men went aloft. Then Bob made out the outlines of a box about six feet long and two broad come swinging below on ropes.

It was rested across the stern of the

yawl, and the lowering tackle was removed.

"Come up!" he heard called out.

"Come out!" he whispered to Buff.

Everything as to the crow on the vessel was pure surmise with Bob, but he realized that the moment for decisive action had arrived, and it must be promptly improved.

"See here, Buff," he continued, in a low tone in his comrade's ear, as both crept from covert, "that box is what these people came after?"

"Sure!"

"It's what two thousand dollars was paid for?"

"Right again, I think."

"We want that box."

"If we can get it."

"Listen!"

Bob bent his ear. Then he ran up the rope dangling over the ship's side, peered a moment across its deck, slipped back, and rapidly untied the ropes holding the yawl at stay.

"Can you row?" he whispered to Buff.

"I can try."

"Softly! Don't put for that island—strike boldly into the fog."

"Start, it is!"

The yawl drifted abaft slowly. Bob had seen no one on the deck of the vessel, but he had heard sounds of laughing and clinking glasses in the cabin.

He estimated that they would have about two minutes' free action before the absence of the yawl and box was discovered.

The vessel was swallowed up in the mists. The fog shrouded the yawl. Suddenly a light showed to one side.

"Somebody bearing down upon us—don't get run over!" warned Buff.

"No—stay the oars. It's a tug."

"Just grazed her course. It's heavy pulling on the oars."

"We must mend that," remarked Bob.

"How?"

Bob was peering at the tug and her consorts.

She had in tow a string of sand scows.

As the first of these passed, Bob reached for a long coil of rope lying in the bottom of the yawl.

He inspected it closely, looped it as if

he meant to do something with it, and ordered Buff:

"Row, now."

"Ahead?"

"Yes."

"But we'll run into the side of one of those barges?"

"Don't delay—do as I say! That's just what I want."

Two things urged Bob's tones up to unusual sharpness.

In the first place, he had a scheme in view, and running into the barge meant its initial step.

In the next, there was an outcry back in the mist-laden gloom—the loss of the yawl Susan had been discovered.

Buff would have obeyed Bob's orders if the latter had directed him to row into a maelstrom.

He drove the oars deep, and the yawl promised to strike the last of the sand barges just ahead of its stern.

"Reverse!" suddenly called out Bob.

As he spoke, the rope flung wide of his grasp with a graceful swoop of its looped end.

Coming up from the rear of the barge were the ends of a dozen or more posts, so revealed because the top sheathing board had come off.

The loop caught on one of these. Bob dropped to a seat.

"Hold steady—we're going to veer sharp!" he spoke to Buff.

The yawl nearly tipped as it was dragged sideways.

Then it swung to the rear, the holding line came taut, and it went forward true and straight as an arrow.

Bob uttered a decided sigh of relief and satisfaction; Buff's face expanded into a proud smile.

"We've won!" he observed.

"So far as getting the box is concerned, yes," admitted Bob.

"That's all Red Jeff was after."

"I am sure of that. So far as he is concerned, the deal is no more than a night foray after junk."

"But some one is behind him."

"That's it, Buff. I wish I knew who. There's the essence of the scheme. However, we couldn't miss that golden opportunity to nab the box."

"Wonder what's in it?"

Something they don't dare to land in a legitimate way."

"That's certain, and we'll soon know."

"Yes, soon as we can we'll get it home."

"Going to take it to Mr. Carter's?"

"Straight. We'll call him into consultation, see what the thing holds, proceeds of a robbery; something smuggled, I think, of great value—and then start after the real actor in this affair."

"If we can find him?"

"Got to. I saw that vessel's name."

"What was it?"

"Abdallah."

"There's a clue."

"Oh, we'll hunt up plenty of them when we start out fresh. Here's a big catch. Let us get that safely off our hands before we think of anything else."

Bob gave no care for the crowd on the vessel—there was no possibility of their catching up with them, even if they knew the direction in which they had escaped.

Drawn safely, swiftly and evenly in the wake of the sand barge, present progress was of the most satisfactory kind.

Bob spent some time guessing what was in the box—he even tapped it, poked his finger into one of a dozen holes in its top.

Then as he got nearer to the lights of the city, he gave up guessing and kept eyes and wits on the alert to land right.

The tug in advance swung toward the Brooklyn bridge, bound for some point beyond it, and Bob got ready to cut loose.

They fell astern, rowed to a wharf, and Bob clambered up it, found a belated express wagon, and into this the box was soon landed.

Buff was radiantly content as they rattled over the noisy paving stones.

Bob had won a new laurel in his detective career, and he had helped him do it, and Buff was proud, happy and curious.

His busy mind, full of all kinds of excited suggestions as to what the box contained, was firmly set on the conviction that when that cover came off a mystery of the biggest kind would come to light with it.

"It's worth the bother we've had, just to be by when it's done!" he declared to himself.

Two minutes after they had reached Nick Carter's house, that place was a scene of vivid animation.

The box was carried into the large sitting-room and placed on a big table.

Nick advised of his favorite's return "with news"—such was the message Bob called up through Nick's private speaking-tube—came down promptly.

Jack Burton, Aleck White and Larry Moore, other members of the detective school, tumbled out of their beds in short order, as Nick tapped at their doors and gave them the hint that "something was up."

Bob rattled off the essential points in the doings of the night clearly, but with brevity.

There could be no doubt—all hands conceded—but that the box contained stolen or smuggled goods of immense value.

Nick examined it curiously. Its cover was only lightly nailed down and a screw-driver loosened it so that strong Jack Burton, getting his giant-hinged fingers under it, ripped it off with very little effort.

Perhaps six more interested faces never peered down into a surprise box.

A counterpane showed, snugly tucked in three-quarters of the length of the box.

Its remaining space was covered with a piece of filmy gauze.

A deadening taint was noticed proceeding from the box as it was first opened, and now a cloud of it arose stupefyingly.

After drawing back slightly to wait for this to dissipate, all five young detectives pressed forward with renewed eagerness, as Nick lifted up the piece of gauze.

A simultaneous cry of motley import rang out.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PAINTED ARM.

The box Nick Carter's young detectives had wrested from the possession of the New York harbor thieves contained a human being.

A man of about middle age lay back on a pillow covered with a counterpane, eyes closed and perfectly insensible to what was going on about him.

His face was a thoroughly good one,

but was bronzed, apparently through the hot rays of a tropical sun, and wrinkles of thought, grief or care had lined his brow.

Even Nick Carter himself was slightly startled at this unexpected revelation, and stood silently gazing down at the queer cargo of the night for some time.

Bob was greatly excited and surprised—to his quick mind here at the seeming end of a case was practically its real beginning.

Buff looked slightly disappointed. He had entertained gorgeous visions of smugglers' treasures, robbers' rich booty—silks, coin, jewels—something opulent and dazzling.

"He's asleep——" Bob was the first one to speak.

"He has been drugged," supplemented the detective.

"What do you make out of that, Mr. Carter?" inquired Buff, eagerly.

"Let me try to make something out of the man first, and then I will tell you," announced Nick.

He took a glass of water from the server and sprinkled the sleeper's face.

Then he tried a whiff or two of ammonia, following this up by opening one eyelid and placing a small pinch of snuff beneath it.

Except for faint flutterings and involuntary spasmodic movements, however, the slumberer withstood all these tests.

Nick bent his ear to his heart, felt his pulse, listened to his chest notes, and reported:

"This man's place is in bed, in a well ventilated room."

"Can we not arouse him?" inquired Bob.

"Not at present. He is laboring with a dense, but harmless, drug."

"And its effects will be gone——"

"By to-morrow noon."

"Must we wait that long!" cried Bob, disappointedly.

"Wait for what, Bob?" asked the detective.

"To find out."

"His story? Yes. The scheme back of him? Yes. In the meantime, however, you might cogitate over the probabilities of a case something like this: A man from some foreign country is coming to

the United States with some secret or secret power. An enemy or a friend who has wronged him, learns of it. He bribes the captain of the ship to never allow him to land in New York city, to deliver him up to him. This captain scares his other passengers away by claiming to have yellow fever aboard. He drugs and boxes up this man. Red Jeff, hired by the enemy, goes to get him. He missed connections, you checkmated him, and—to-morrow this man will tell us his whole story."

Bob was forced to be content with this. He helped Nick and the others carry the man to an upstairs chamber.

There they gently disrobed him, placed him in a comfortable bed, and Nick opened all the windows in the room.

"Give him time and plenty of air, and we'll have him chatting with us at lunch to-morrow," prophesied the detective. "Oh, Bob! set his collar and wristbands loose. Help nature, it is the only restorative in these noxious tropical drugs."

"I say, Mr. Carter!"

Freeing the patient's neck and one arm, Bob gave quite a start as he came to the other arm.

The wristband flapped loose, revealing a queer state of affairs beneath.

Beginning at his wrist, there ran up the man's arm a solid stain—jet black.

Bob traced it to the elbow and saw that it reached apparently clear up to the shoulder.

He directed Nick's attention to it.

"I call that queer!" declared Bob.

"So do I," admitted Nick. "It is no bruise or natural discoloration. The arm is painted."

"Painted!" ejaculated Bob.

"Yes."

"What for?"

"I should say for some burn, or to prevent the spread of some poison sting or bite. It is a dense pigment, and will wash off. Leave that till to-morrow, too, Bob. We've got the case and the man now thoroughly in our own hands, and can exploit its mysteries at our leisure."

"You wouldn't try to hunt up Red Jeff to-night?"

"It would hardly pay."

Bob and all hands retired to rest on the detective's advice, the latter included.

It was hard getting to sleep, however. Bob had been used to going through with a case at lightning speed, once started in on it, and the present wait, brief and natural as it was, irritated him.

He was sure that some great plot would be unmasked through the queer human cargo he had intercepted, some strange mystery appended to that painted arm.

He was fighting for its possession in his dreams with Red Jeff just after sunrise, when he was roused up by a vigorous shaking at the hands of Buff.

"Bob, wake up! hurry up—oh, Bob!"

Buff's face bore traces of excitement, and he was breathlessly concerned.

"What is it, Buff?"

"The man!"

"He's woke up?"

"And gone!"

"What!"

Bob was out on the floor in a flash, diving into his clothes any way to get them on.

"He's gone!" reiterated Buff. "Mr. Carter just discovered it, and sent for you——"

"You mean——"

"Stole away."

"When?"

"Nobody knows."

Bob came down the stairs on a run. He found his patron with his hat on in the hall.

"Steady, Bob," advised the latter, curbing the young cyclone of excitement. "The man's gone, but he may not be gone far."

"He may have left hours ago!"

"That is hardly possible. I miscalculated on a drug I was unfamiliar with, that is all. I imagine he woke up since daylight, for he could not have climbed down into the yard, leaving no trace in the darkness. He may think we are enemies—he may be in some restaurant in the neighborhood. Leave that for me to find out."

Bob wandered up to the vacant room and down again to the long hall restlessly half a dozen times, on pins and needles of suspense, during the absence of Nick Carter.

It was prolonged one hour, then a second.

Bob could stand it no longer.

"Buff, I feel we're wasting valuable time!" he declared, emphatically. "I'm going out to search for that man."

At the door, however, he came face to face with the detective himself.

Bob only glanced at Nick once, to know that he had no particularly good news to report.

"You haven't found him, Mr. Carter?" he projected, anxiously.

"No, but I have set some machinery in motion that may help us accomplish that result. Had your breakfast?"

"I couldn't eat."

"Go and get it."

Bob knew his patron's way. He would not speak further till the day was started right—with a good square meal.

"Now, Mr. Carter," reported Bob, entering the library a few minutes later, "I'm ready to go on the track of that man."

"All right, Bob, that is what I intend you shall do. The police are looking for him on description."

"We can't rely on that."

"No, we have a better clue."

"Eh?" cried Bob, pricking up his ears.

"What do you say to that?"

Nick handed over the latest edition of a morning newspaper.

It was folded across an advertisement page.

Taking up double space in the Lost and Found column was the following:

"Five hundred dollars reward. The above sum will be paid for any information that will lead to the discovery of James Singleton, lost last night from the bark Abdallah, off Quarantine—dead or alive."

An accurate description of the man the young detectives had found in the box followed.

But it was at the name of the person offering the reward that Bob gazed keenly, eagerly.

"Apply to Victor Rhodes, Temple Block."

That was Bob Ferret's clue.

CHAPTER VII.

THE IVORY HAMMER.

Nick Carter's youngest and brightest detective pupil went at once to the vicinity of the address given in the advertisement.

He knew, however, that he had an entirely different class of people to deal with now than the river thieves.

It had been rough and tumble work with Red Jeff's gang—but shrewdness would now count instead of force, in case this Victor Rhodes was the employer Red Jeff had alluded to.

"James Singleton—I know the name of the man in the box, at all events," soliloquized Bob. "The promptness with which this Rhodes advertises for him only a few hours after we got him away in the yawl, shows conclusively that he must have received instant word of the lost box. Now then, to work—quick, but cautiously!"

Bob assumed a disguise that completely concealed his late identity.

First he made active inquiries concerning Rhodes, and within the space of half an hour had his record down fine.

There were two Rhodes—father and son. The elder was not in business.

The younger Rhodes posed as a lawyer, although Bob learned that his cases were few, and that he was more of a mortgage shark than an attorney.

The minute Bob entered his office he discerned that its occupant had a crafty, unscrupulous character.

He stated his case very simply: He wanted work, he had seen the advertisement. Somebody wanted to find a missing man. Hire him to hunt for him.

The lawyer looked him over with a smile at his apparent simplicity.

"Why, half a dozen amateur detectives and agency men have been here with all kinds of schemes this morning," said Rhodes. "They're very positive as to what they're 'going' to do! What we want is a trace of the missing man. Find the remotest hint of that, and we're ready to talk."

"If you'd authorize me now, and give me a few more particulars," murmured Bob.

"Why, I authorize anybody, every-

body. James Singleton, on board the Abdallah, disappeared last night, accurate description given. Eh?"

"Telephone, sir."

The office boy had interrupted. Rhodes stepped into the next room.

"Who is it?" Bob heard him ask. "Oh! you, father? What—what! Found? Got him? I'll be home right off. Famous!"

Lawyer Rhodes came back into the inner office one vast glow of chuckling satisfaction, of half-suppressed excitement.

Bob, under the surface, was quite as actively moved, but he did not show it.

Rhodes bundled a lot of papers into a drawer and hurriedly drew on his overcoat.

"Oh!" he remarked, observing Bob, "thought you had gone. About that hoax? As I said, nothing to it."

"But you didn't say——" began Bob.

"Then I say it now. Some malicious or mischievous person inserted that Singleton advertisement. We don't even know the name. All a sell, a joke—see?"

Rhodes hustled Bob out of the office, gave a sharp order to the boy in charge, and was down the elevator before Bob could get in another word.

"They've found him—they've got Singleton!"

All the affected simplicity of a rather stupid fellow out of work and running down all kinds of prospects to get it, disappeared like magic from Bob's face.

His visit to the lawyer's office had been timely, resultful.

That telephone message incautiously repeated by the excited Rhodes, had given Bob a sure clue.

There was not the slightest doubt in Bob's mind but that Singleton had fallen into the hands of his enemies.

That such the Rhodes' were there could be no question whatever.

The advertisement, the lying evasion of the lawyer, the manner in which the telephone message had been received, settled this point beyond dispute.

"Singleton has been run across by some of Rhodes' emissaries, or visiting the Rhodes residence has been detained there," reasoned out Bob. "I'll get there, double quick, myself!"

He knew where it was—he had learned that along with his other recent investigations.

The cab Bob engaged could not have been ten minutes behind that occupied by Rhodes in reaching the home of the latter.

It was an ordinary house on an ordinary street. Dismissing the conveyance at the corner, Bob inspected the place.

He was strolling by it for the second time, planning how he could get into it unperceived, when its front door opened abruptly.

The man he had seen at the office in the Temple Building appeared at the threshold.

He was more excited than he had been when the telephone message had arrived, and he was hurrying out a man who looked like a servant.

"Dr. Dennis—quick, now!" he spoke. "Tell him we are all ready."

"Yes, Mr. Rhodes," nodded the servant, squaring his hat on his head for a hurried trip.

"And be sure to tell him to bring the apparatus for the operation."

"Apparatus for the operation," repeated the servant.

"Very good, sir. That's all?"

"Except to hurry."

"Yes, sir."

Every word of this animated colloquy Bob's quick ear caught distinctly.

He put after the man as he made down the street.

"Waiting for the doctor means everything held in suspense in that house till he arrives," theorized Bob. "What's up, I wonder? Does it pertain to this Singleton? 'Apparatus for the operation!' Now, what may that be? It sounds mighty ominous!"

Bob had to go fast to keep up with the servant, but his thoughts flew as well.

He was planning to get into his good graces on the return trip from the doctor's office, when the man dove into a squalid side street.

He entered the open hallway of a rickety dwelling with a faded, battered sign outside bearing the name, "Dr. Dennis."

"Queer place to come for the physician of a reputable family!" mused Bob.

He edged into the long dark hall, heard

a knock, a response, and the servant's sing-song tones repeating the message from Lawyer Rhodes.

Then the servant darted past him for the street again, and Bob prepared to follow.

As the man cleared the steps, however, and Bob the threshold, a hoarse interjection halted him.

"Here, you!"

The person who had received the message, Dr. Dennis, reopened his door. Bob hesitated.

"Do you hear me—you fellow from Rhodes?"

"Want me?" propounded Bob, advancing.

"Yes—no! Who are you? I wanted the man who just brought me a message," spoke Dr. Dennis.

He was a squatty, greasy-skinned man, in whose hands as a patient Bob voted he would scarcely leave his worst enemy.

"I came with him," said Bob, "but he's gone back."

"Nice thing!" grumbled the doctor, and Bob, studying him closely, decided that he was a Greek. "Send for me in a rush, and never wait to help me with my traps!"

"I'll help you," said Bob, promptly. "What can I do, doctor?"

"Come in."

Dr. Dennis accepted Bob unsuspectingly as all right. Bob's claim that he had come with Rhodes' servant settled that.

Bob could not guess how the affair would turn out, but he determined to pursue this branch of the adventure till it developed something one way or the other.

The doctor put a lot of queer instruments into a satchel.

Then he boxed in a canvas case a square electric battery.

"Getting too old to lug that half a mile alone," he remarked.

"I'll carry it," spoke Bob. "Got nothing else to do. You see, I saw Mr. Rhodes about giving me work this morning, so I'll carry it to his house and back again, if you like, and be glad to put in the time."

"Very good," assented Mr. Dennis. "You deserve work for being so accom-

modating. I shall probably be an hour or two at the house, though."

"Oh, time's nothing to me; I'll wait for you," said Bob.

He only hoped that it would be inside the house that he would be allowed to wait. That would be luck in accordance with his most ardent hopes.

It was inside the house. As they reached it, the servant who had brought the message to the doctor admitted the latter promptly, as if waiting for him.

"Go at once to the library, sir. They are waiting for you," he said.

"Put my traps in the hall. He'll wait for me," spoke the doctor, indicating Bob.

As the doctor tapped at a door, the servant led Bob past it two rooms beyond.

It was a sort of smoking apartment. He carelessly nodded Bob to a chair, and Bob heard him proceed down the hall.

Then his footsteps were checked as Rhodes' tones spoke.

"Go below, and keep the servants there till the doctor leaves," he uttered sharply.

"Yes, sir."

Bob heard the man go downstairs. He was overlooked, forgotten, and this just suited him.

He caught the echo of quick voices from the library. Its door closed. Then it opened again.

A slight jangle convinced Bob that the doctor had taken in his traps. He heard the library door close.

"Now for a peep!" muttered Bob.

He opened the door cautiously, made sure of his ground, glided to the next, listened, turned its knob, and a second later stood at the side of a sliding door slightly ajar.

"Never," that was the first word that met his hearing—"never, I tell you! No, not a word!"

Bob peered. The speaker was Singleton. He sat on a chair, tied to it hand and foot.

He was white as death. Two persons confronted him—the lawyer and an older man, evidently his father.

Their faces were unfriendly, almost menacing.

"You will not deny, however, that you

came to this city purposely to give us trouble?" insinuated young Rhodes.

"Trouble!" cried the captive. "To unmask you, and that I swear to do! Hark you! scoundrels, plotters, murderers—for you drove into exile my poor friend, John Lester, to die of a broken heart, you made him believe that two years since when intoxicated he fired a shot that killed a man. You got him to make over his property in trust to you, and flee. I sought him out. I told him the real truth of his innocence, but too late. He died, but I have returned to vindicate him. The world shall know the truth—of your dastardly double dealing!"

"I presume you hope to wrest his property from us also?" sneered Rhodes.

"That trifle! no; but wait till you know all! His sister, whom you left in poverty, shall yet take her rightful place far above you—far above you!"

"He has no papers. What proofs can he have to disturb us?" ventured the elder Rhodes.

"He knows—he has some secret power!" hissed the lawyer. "Enough of this! Doctor!"

The Greek physician advanced.

"Do you see this man?" demanded the lawyer of Singleton. "He is our friend."

"He looks it!"

"Dennis," continued Rhodes, "do you know what we want done? Seal this man's lips!"

"Seal them!" shouted Singleton, in a wild transport of excitement. "Do you think that will destroy my power? Ah! there is an imperishable record——"

"End this!"

Dr. Dennis drew his battery close to the chair. He placed a steel cap with one small opening in it over Singleton's skull.

He applied various wires to it, and one he held in his hand. In the other hand he poised a small ivory mallet.

"Ready!" he spoke.

"Connect the battery?" queried Rhodes.

"Yes."

Singleton's face was ashen, but he only glared and panted hopelessly.

Bob was never so startled in his life.

Only one reasonable theory occurred to his mind.

These monsters in human form were about to electrocute the man with the painted arm!

Whir!

Before Bob could make a move, the electric battery started up.

Before he could utter a cry to deter, the poised ivory hammer dropped through the aperture in the steel cap.

Tap!

CHAPTER VIII.

DONE WITH A CLICK!

A tragedy had taken place—Bob was sure of it.

Yet to his amazement the man in the chair only paled the deeper, closed his eyes spasmodically, and then opened them wide again.

Dr. Dennis threw down the ivory hammer and turned off the electric current.

"It's done," he announced, simply.

There was perfect confidence, a certain professional triumph in his tone.

Old Rhodes stared intently, young Rhodes looked anxious.

"Sure of that?" he demanded.

"I never fail!" spoke Dennis, in a voice that somehow sounded terrible to the mystified Bob.

"Untie him?"

"He is harmless forevermore."

"And then?"

"Turn him loose."

Bob's wits whirled.

Turn him loose—set free the man whom they had so dreaded an instant previous!

What was the meaning of this? for just that thing they were doing.

Singleton was unbound, lifted from the chair, set on his feet, led toward the door of the room.

Bob sped to the hall door of the apartment he was in. He saw the doctor put a hat on Singleton's head, and the lawyer led him through the vestibule and opened the front door.

"Go!" he said, simply, and pushed him out on the steps.

"Oh, I'm dreaming!" muttered Bob.

Dreaming or not, he must keep the man with the painted arm in sight at all hazards.

Bob drew back in the room, studied the windows, opened one, sprang out, rounded the house, and crossing to the next yard, came out into the street from its front.

He glanced eagerly toward the house he had just left.

From the library window three faces peered out—those of the men who had just committed some singular crime—Bob knew this, but was not yet clear as to its entire import.

Singleton had reached the bottom of the stone steps.

From all Bob could discern, he had undergone no change.

The pallor had left his face, the excitement had faded from his eyes. Except for a certain dazed uncertainty of manner, he looked and acted perfectly natural.

Glancing up street, down street, he started suddenly forward, passing Bob on a rapid walk.

Bob paid no attention to him that could attract the notice of the people at the window.

He simply kept Singleton in easy hailing distance, turned when he turned, and after proceeding several squares, caught up with him.

"Good-morning, Mr. Singleton," he ventured.

With the pleasantest smile in the world, Singleton extended his hand.

"Ah, senor!" he remarked.

"Going to the plaza?"

"What plaza?" stared Bob.

"We are down a cent on Santos, you know?" continued Singleton, in a business-like tone. "Sugars are a poor investment. We must curtail shipments from the plantations, eh?"

"He thinks he is in Brazil," ejaculated Bob.

Singleton rattled on at a great rate, and Bob let him talk uninterruptedly for suddenly Bob began to guess out the truth.

It was all about sugars, coffees, diamonds, Rio Janeiro, plantations, the markets.

As they neared an office building Bob knew well, he caught his companion's arm and brought him to a halt.

"Mr. Singleton," he said, "will you come with me a minute or two?"

"Why not?"

"I want to introduce you to a friend."

"Good! We may be able to unload some surplus sugars on him, eh?"

Bob led his companion into a doctor's office, that of a physician of high skill in whom Nick Carter had great confidence.

Bob knew him familiarly. While Singleton was examining some pictures on the wall, he found time to hurriedly explain to the physician what had just occurred.

The face of the latter drew down as Bob proceeded. It grew very stern as he said:

"I must make at least a cursory examination of the patient."

This had to be worked deftly. The doctor talked sugar and coffee with Singleton for a minute or two, proposed a glass of wine, and ten minutes later had his visitor under the influence of a light drug in his operating chair.

"Horrible!"

Bob thrilled at the doctor's report after a close inspection of Singleton's head.

"What have they done, doctor?" he inquired, falteringly.

"They have killed this man's memory."

"Incredible!"

"I have heard of this infamous Dennis before," said the doctor. "It is rumored that he was once employed in Italy to scientifically maim, blind, distort children so they grew up objects of pity, professional beggars."

"It seems monstrous!"

"He has depressed a portion of this man's skull, has killed all memory of the past—he is a machine, henceforth."

"But his brightness, his intelligence——"

"On the sugar markets of Brazil? Yes. That will continue the one atmosphere in which he will live. Placed on the moon, he would entertain that fallacy, that alone. Of his past, its associations, its secrets, its connection with the present, the future—all, all is a blank to him, will so continue to the end."

"This is too deep for me!"

With a sigh Bob confessed it. Well might his triumphant enemies turn loose their victim.

They had deprived him of memory, of reason—what had they to fear?

Shrinking at actual murder, they had simply grazed the gallows by killing his mind.

It placed everything in a muddle. To arrest these men to hunt up John Lester's pauper sister, the captain of the Abdallah, Red Jeff and his malodorous crew—all this might be modeled into some kind of a result, but not the one aimed at.

They could punish, but they could not probe. The secret knowledge James Singleton had entertained had been forever buried under the stroke of the electrically propelled ivory mallet!

"Doctor," spoke Bob, "I feel that I must call Mr. Carter into instant consultation."

"I deem it best myself," answered the physician. "This man should be taken care of—kept in friendly control. Something might—mind you, I name a mere fleeting possibility—something might be done to ameliorate his unfortunate condition."

"Will you hold him here till I return?" inquired Bob.

"I promise that."

Bob started for the door. He was going after Nick Carter. An intricate exigency had arisen that he felt to be beyond his power of grasping coherently.

At the door, however, he turned. A sudden thought had occurred to him.

He approached the operating chair. It was drawn close up to an open window looking out on a court.

Not ten feet across fronted the windows of other offices, but view from these was excluded by a shade raising up from the bottom.

This Bob drew down—he even wheeled the chair nearer to the strong light reflected from the white-tiled brick walls of the court.

"Look, doctor—I want to show you something," he said.

Bob pulled up Singleton's sleeve and disclosed the black-painted forearm.

"Why! what is this?" inquired the physician, curiously.

"Something that just occurred to me," explained Bob. "We noticed that painted arm in disorbing this man early this morning."

The doctor looked closely at the stained limb. He brought out a magnifying glass, he rubbed some acid on the flesh.

"Why!" he said, quite interestedly, "this is a movable stain covering some writing.

"Some what?" ejaculated Bob, vividly startled.

"Writing—letters."

"On his arm?"

"Yes, under the paint."

"Doctor! What?"

"You want to know?"

"Do I want to know?" voiced Bob, ardently. "Why! Singleton interrupted himself in his defiance of Rhodes, claiming that there was certain imperishable proof as to his secret power to unmask him and enrich his friend's orphan sister."

"Ah!" murmured the doctor, impressively.

"Can this be it?"

"You shall soon know."

The doctor ripped up the sleeve of the arm but half exposed.

Engrosed, tremendously excited, Bob watched and helped.

Along the forearm, as the application of some acid gradually removed the stain, there began to appear the natural white flesh.

Then the contrast diminishing, there appeared, as if written on a scroll of vellum, letters—words, sentences.

"A human parchment!" murmured the doctor. "You have it complete."

"It is written——"

"Quite a record, with some powerful indelible ink, as effectively as if tattooed."

Bob fluttered mightily. It was a wonderful discovery.

The writing was clear, plain, large.

He read its first section:

"I, John Lester, solemnly certify to all that my friend, James Singleton, may testify as to the plot to drive me into exile on the part of the Rhodes, father and son, who hold my estate illegally."

The next section began:

"In the haste of flight I hid away the bulk of my fortune. This will be found——"

"What's that!" interrupted the doctor, and sharply looked up.

It was—click!

Bob started and peered keenly.

Then he uttered a vivid cry of alarm and dismay.

Across the court, just retreating from a window on a perfect level with Singleton's uncovered arm, was a man.

At a glance Bob recognized him—Victor Rhodes!

In his hand the lawyer held a camera.

Its shutter had caused the click.

It had opened, closed, to take a flashing photograph.

James Singleton's enemies and Bob Ferret's enemies had gained possession of the secret of the painted arm!

Bob did not wait to see if the doctor connected man, camera and patient.

The recognition of Singleton, the snap of the shutter, an instant comprehension of the fact that he had been followed by people from the Rhodes house, urged him up to impulsive action.

He was out of the room, down the hall, around to the corridor fronting the offices opposite in a flash.

Elevators, two sets of stairways, rooms above, and rooms below—Bob realized that a person could lose himself in a twinkling in this vast busy hive.

He dove, therefore, for the office where he had seen Rhodes with the camera.

He knew it by a glance across the court where the doctor and his patient were in full view.

Three young fellows, clerks, were in the office. One was counting over some bills and chuckling, the others were watching him covetously.

Bob took a hurried glance around. Rhodes was not in the department.

He ran so hastily up to the young fellow with the money, that the latter put the bills behind him as if deeming him a thief.

"Quick!" urged Bob—"do any of you fellows know a man named Rhodes?"

"No," came a triple dissent.

"He was in this office a minute ago."

"Oh! the man who was at the window?" began the young fellow with the money?"

"Yes."

"With my camera?"

"Yours?"

"He came in, and seemed interested watching the doctor's office——"

"Yes! yes!"

"My camera was on the desk there. I brought it to take a view in the park on my bicycle home spin to-night."

"Was it loaded?"

"He asked me that, snapped it, turned like a flash, hauled out a roll of bills, threw down fifty dollars before me with 'There's double value,' and shot through the door like a flash. I thought he was crazy."

The office clerks must have deemed Bob crazy, too, for the young detective dashed from the room without a word of explanation.

He got down to the street and scanned it keenly, but he had not hoped to get a glimpse of Rhodes, nor did he.

As he returned toward the doctor's office he was thoughtful and worried.

Success had been shrewdly snatched from his hands at a moment when it seemed positively within his grasp.

The unique inscription on James Singleton's arm which he had only half read, told where the bulk of his dead friend's fortune was hidden.

With a perfect photographic copy of that same, the scheming lawyer was now speeding away.

Bob proceeded up the stairway leading to the doctor's office formulating rapidly the score of things that must be done at once to keep results from slipping from his control.

Just reaching the landing of the floor where it was located, a form swept by him with such force and rapidity as to almost carry him off his feet.

"Take care, there!" he spoke. "Stop!"

He put out a hand, but it grazed a dodging form.

Then, as he was ready for a grabbing swoop upon the passing figure, it halted.

One hand shot out. It jabbed something bright at Bob, who dodged back.

It was not a weapon, but a long, slim surgical tool of some kind, sharp-pointed, and deadly as a Venetian stiletto.

"I know you—Dr. Dennis!" cried Bob. "What are you up to here?"

"You—spy! Take it!" hissed the doctor.

It was the Greek physician—Bob had

made no mistake, and Dennis directed a vicious lunge at an adversary he knew would not let him get away unless disabled.

Spry Bob evaded the thrust. Warned and enlightened, he posed to detain the man who could be in that building for no good purpose, and for no other purpose, surely, than one connected with Singleton.

A flashing suspicion told him that both Rhodes and Dennis must have followed him step by step.

Just then a sharp cry rang out down the hall. It came from the doctor's office, and the doctor himself uttered it.

As Bob saw that person stagger through its doorway, his interest was at once distracted from Dennis.

The latter instantly sprang down the stairs, as something in the doctor's plight drew Bob to his side.

"What is it? Speak!" urged Bob.

"I am choking—suffocating! That fiend! A man entered the office——"

"It was Dennis, the Greek physician," declared Bob.

"He broke a capsule of some vile drug in my face——"

"Singleton? your patient—did he harm him?"

"I do not know."

Bob rushed through the doorway of the office.

The man with the painted arm lay where he had been placed at the first. There was apparently no change in him.

Bob looked him over, trying to guess why the Greek had entered the room.

Then his eye falling to the arm where the stain had just been removed, his heart sank like lead.

"Knocked out!" he spoke simply, but expressing volumes.

The arm was red, blotched, disfigured—some powerful corroding acid had certainly just been applied by the crafty Dennis.

The writing it had borne so clearly ten minutes previous was a blur.

Even as he looked, the dismayed Bob saw the inscription blend into a mass of discoloration, grow vague, fade out.

He felt his natural shrewdness to be at a discount, as he realized what ten min-

utes' sharp work on the part of his enemies had effected.

They had baffled him at every turn.

They now possessed the only copy in the world of the secret of the man with the painted arm!

CHAPTER IX.

THROUGH FIRE.

"Apples!"

"Get out!"

"Ripe apples!"

"Will you let up?"

"Dad says if you want any provender while you're camping here, he'll sell it cheap—over at next farm."

A clod of dirt knocked off the speaker's cap, and he picked it up and retreated grumbling.

He had a basket full of fruit on his arm, but twenty feet accomplished with a row of brush between himself and the persons who had so rudely addressed and so roughly driven him away, in among the bushes went the basket with a fling.

Instantly, too, the gawky pose of a country bumpkin gave way to the brisk alertness of shrewd Bob Ferret.

A detective's business leads him into queer places, into widely separated points in a brief space of time.

That of Nick Carter's young pupil had brought him to the spot where he now was, as naturally as an Indian on a trail where all the "signs" are sure.

Thirty-six hours had elapsed since Bob had confessed himself knocked out in the office of the doctor whither he had taken the man with the painted arm.

Placing that individual in Nick Carter's charge, telling the veteran detective the condition of affairs, Bob had started out to follow a very good piece of advice; to get on the track and to keep on the track of Victor Rhodes.

At two o'clock that afternoon Bob had learned two things.

The Rhodes, father and son, and the Greek, Dennis, had left their respective homes.

He guessed that they were in temporary seclusion—developing the photograph, formulating their plans for benefiting by what it might tell.

At five o'clock Bob struck rare luck. Passing a railroad ticket office, he saw inside the servant of the Rhodes household.

Bob waited till he came out, entered the place, and learned that he had just purchased three return tickets for Fairfield, a town in New Jersey.

Bob guessed what was up. He verified it when he arrived at this place the next day.

Two miles away from it was what was left of the once stately home of the dead friend of the man with the painted arm—John Lester.

It had burned down a year previous. By dusk Bob knew that it was to this spot that the photographed writing alluded, for the two Rhodes, their servant and Dennis arrived on the evening train.

They carried several tightly done up packages that looked as if they might contain tools, and gave out at the village hotel that they were going to camp out in the vicinity for a day or two.

This was how it was that Bob had endeavored to penetrate their midst, test his farmer boy disguise, and pave the way for picking up a few morsels of information.

"They won't have it, but they never guess who I am," he soliloquized, creeping in among a dense patch of thick bushes. "They're here for John Lester's hidden fortune—so am I!"

How they were going to get it, how he was going to get it, Bob could not guess, but his spirits were at a decidedly high flow.

A definite task lay before him—clear results were attainable if fortune favored him.

The treasure-hunting party had made it a point to arrive after dark.

Where there was a slight depression in the ground they had built a large camp-fire.

The fire that had destroyed the mansion had burned down a good many trees, and remnants of these afforded an abundance of fuel.

Before the fire, on a log, sat the two Rhodes and Dennis, smoking, occasionally exchanging a word or two.

The servant kept piling on fuel, and

all hands seemed in no hurry to begin operations.

Bob would have given considerable to get near enough to overhear what the three men might say, but he dared not venture it, for there was no desirable covert of brush or weeds in their immediate vicinity.

Finally, however, as he stood watching and pondering, just that issue was irresistibly forced upon him.

The servant who was poking the fire was addressed some words by the younger Rhodes.

Bob guessed that it appertained to his recent intrusion, for he fancied he caught the words "prying strollers."

The servant started away from the others in the very direction he had just gone.

He proceeded slowly, and peered all about him, and Bob had either to retreat and be forced back out of the neighborhood, or round the bushes and trust to luck that the searcher would not come that way.

Bob decided to risk the latter course. It resulted unfavorably, for Rhodes' man began a direct circuit of the bushes.

He beat into them with his stick and he peered in among them, and Bob was never so near discovery.

With some concern he drew nearer and nearer to the camp-fire.

Fortunately the backs of the three men seated there were toward him, instead of their faces.

Bob kept just ahead by crouching out of range of his unconscious pursuer, but he could not maintain this circular run-around beyond a certain point.

"There's a show!" he uttered, abruptly.

The "show" comprised a section of rotted tree.

It lay flat, and was a mere shell. Bob saw that it would afford a capital hiding place, not only near to the fire, but capacious and comfortable.

He dove for its end, and he burrowed into it promptly.

There were little splintered gaps here and there. Securely ensconced, Bob could not only observe the three plotters, but the man he had eyed as well.

The latter resumed his course, and Bob knew he had found what he was longing for at last.

He was not now more than ten feet distant from the log on which the three men sat.

He pricked up his ears diligently as Dr. Dennis' hoarse tones reached him:

"What time do we begin operations, Rhodes?"

The lawyer consulted his watch.

"Oh, in about two hours."

"Think it's best to wait, eh?"

"Surely. Give the inquisitive Paul Prys around here a chance to satisfy their curiosity. They roost early, so we're safe from interruption after ten o'clock."

"Making a good deal of fuss and delay over a mere job of measurement," it seems to me," remarked Dennis.

"We don't know that. This screed isn't altogether plain."

Bob's finger ends tingled to get hold of a photograph Rhodes drew out.

"Well, yes—some parts are a trifle blurred," spoke Dennis—"hurry of taking the picture, I suppose, but it's pretty clear. Oh, well! this is pleasant enough—a variety from the city, with you don't know how many detective spies on your track."

"I fancy the scent's blown," observed the elder Rhodes, carelessly. "How that fellow got onto us in the first place I can't guess."

"The Nick Carter crowd have an unpleasant faculty of getting onto most everything!" growled the Greek doctor.

"Well, we've placated Red Jeff and they can never pump him, the Abdallah is outward bound again, Singleton is a dead issue, memory and message alike, and they may hamper, but they can never prove anything against us," spoke the lawyer.

"There must be considerable of a fortune you never got, according to that little photograph?" insinuated Dennis.

"We can find room for it all!" laughed Rhodes.

There was a lapse of silence. Half an hour went by without event.

The servant came back. The fire had burned quite low, and he began to replenish it.

He got tired finally of picking up small pieces of wood, and began kicking, dragging and rolling dead limbs and larger logs down into the depression.

Bob quivered as he saw the speculating eye of the faithful fire-tender light on the very log he was in.

The man approached it, gave it a testing kick with his foot, and it quivered.

Leaning toward it, with both hands he started it on a roll.

"Oh, this won't do!" muttered Bob in dismay.

The third roll Bob made up his mind he could not help revealing himself.

About to attempt to crawl out, however, the man tipped the log over the edge of the brief incline.

The next minute it rolled squarely down into the nest of fire.

CHAPTER X.

TRAPPED!

A shower of sparks went up. Bob made a vigorous scramble.

There was no denying the desperation of his dilemma, the urgency of immediate action.

It was fortunate that one jagged end of the hollow log arose on a tilt free of the flames.

For this end Bob made. He got out of it in a decided hurry.

It entailed a fall to the ground, but Bob was spry.

As shouts of mingled dismay, amazement, alarm rang out, he bounded to his feet.

Jumping right through the fire so as to evade the four grouped starers, Bob struck a lee-line for the nearest cover.

He had his eye fixed on a row of shrubbery. It was some fifty feet distant, but he hoped to gain it before the startled campers recovered their wits.

"Stop!" challenged him in the lawyer's sharp tones, but he paid no attention.

A shot followed almost immediately. Bob knew the temper of the shooter, and deflected from his outlined course.

A tree, dead and broken off about twenty feet up, was broad enough to shelter him and over it on all sides trailed a great woodbine vine.

Getting it between himself and the camp-fire, Bob grasped its heavy main stem and began to climb.

All four of the men at the camp-fire had put after him, but Bob was away up aloft, well sheltered by a dense mass of leaves by the time they reached the tree.

The servant and the elder Rhodes ran on, Dennis and the lawyer poked in about the vine roots, in and out of the bushes near by, but never thought of looking aloft.

"Where did he go to?" projected Dennis.

"He disappeared here," declared the lawyer. "Now, then, what do you make of that?"

"It looks suspicious, but still it may be that prowling apple seller or some other country gawk, imagining it clever to pry into other people's business."

"The dickens!" whispered Bob to himself just here.

The vine was giving. He clutched a handful of smaller feelers. These strained, and he described a quick ascent to save a drop.

He had got to the top of the tree now. Catching one of its jagged sides, he lifted himself up to a more comfortable position.

Bob sought to balance himself there in as small a compass as possible.

He swung both feet over down into the hollow of the tree, and sitting on its edge wriggled under a canopy of leaves.

"All right now, I guess," he soliloquized—"No, all wrong!"

Bob's hand came swinging around and down, and with it came a big rotten piece of the tree.

He fell, sliding forward, tried to catch at something, missed, and went shooting downward, feet foremost.

"Whew!"

Breath and wits seemed shaken out of him, for he landed as much as twenty feet down with startling abruptness.

The shock would have been tremendous but for the fact that he found his feet nested in a bed of soft, punky refuse that had rotted away from the inside trunk of the tree.

One shoulder was quite badly bruised, for it had received a hard knock as it passed a knob on the centre of the trunk.

Here the hollow had narrowed so Bob could just slide through and that was all.

He could turn around, he was probably safe from the remotest contingency of discovery on the part of his enemies; but Bob did not fancy his new dilemma.

If his descent had caused any particular rustling, either it had not been noticed by Dennis and the lawyer, or they attributed it to disturbed birds.

Bob heard their voices recede and then die away altogether.

"I can't stay in here," he muttered. "It's stand up all night, if I do, and it's close as a furnace!"

He felt all around his queer prison place, turning a complete circle in doing so.

"Smooth as glass," he commented—"not a break, not a hollow. Yes, here's one, but chest-high, only."

Bob poked his finger into a punky rotting knob. Its core pushed out.

It was only big as a thimble head, but he was glad of one thing—it made an aperture looking out directly on the camp-fire fifty feet away.

He could make out there the four men who had pursued him.

They would discuss, then separate, scour the vicinity, return, sit down, get up, and act generally like people badly disturbed and very uneasy.

"This will hurry their operations," decided Bob. "Where will I be when they get the plunder? Not in here, I hope, worse than helpless. Not if I can help it!"

With a doughty will Bob set at work to get up out of the hollow tree as he had got down into it.

He found even the initial steps the hardest work he had ever undertaken.

It was like scaling a smooth tube.

At last he thought of something that might take considerable time, but it seemed the only course open to him.

Employing the largest blade of his pocket knife, he cut little notches about two feet apart till he got them head high.

With a single toe and finger hold made possible by a sturdy back brace, Bob reached up his free hand, cut a higher notch, gained that, another, and then made a strange discovery.

Groping up, his hand came in contact with some daugling object.

"Why," declared the mystified Bob—"it's a rope!"

Such it was, and he seized it. He had not noticed it in the rush of his descent.

Bob pulled at it. The strands strained slightly, but it sustained his weight.

"Famous!" he exulted.

But three feet accomplished, Bob found his new hopes dashed.

He had come to the narrow part of the cavity.

Through this he had slid, and if the tree had been flat he might have managed to force through, but, lifting, he saw after one or two arduous efforts, that it would be an impossibility to wedge past the inside trunk bulge.

"Give it up, because I've got to give it up!" he soliloquized regretfully.

Bob dropped to the bottom, glad to relieve his strained sinews.

His predicament, he now decided, was something more than inconvenience—it was serious.

Unaided, he could certainly not get out of that tree, and he had no idea of appealing to the four deadly enemies in sight.

He now abandoned all hopes of being on hand when they made their hunt for the hidden fortune.

His only theory of escape was that after they had departed he might the next day hail some casual passer-by from his minute loophole of observation.

He saw the quartet at the camp-fire lighting a lantern and undoing their bundles, and guessed that they would soon begin to search for what they had come after.

"I'd like to know how that rope hanging down the inside of this tree got here. What's it for?" he mused. "Hello! I smashed through a piece of bark and caught my foot in my fall," he continued, as he lifted one foot to change his position.

He kicked clear the obstruction. Then he applied himself to watch the treasure hunters.

They were down to business at last.

Old Rhodes carried a lantern. He held this close to his son, who walked along with frequent references to the photograph of the painted arm.

This he inspected through a magnifying glass, and each time he did so he would say something to Dennis and the servant who carried a long tape line.

Bob saw them strike a central point—near where the ruins of a house foundation showed.

The lawyer called off distances. Dennis repeated, and would run out the line.

Once it ended right at the tree in which Nick Carter's young detective was incased.

Twice—three times—and Dennis sang out:

"Here's the spot. Does that end the directions?"

"It does," replied young Rhodes, running up quite excited. "Yes, Dennis, this is certainly the place."

"This tree is blurred——"

"That's what's in the photograph—sixty feet, ending at a some kind of a something. Why not 'oak tree'?"

"All the measurements end here. We've found it. Rhodes, John Lester's hidden fortune is in that tree!"

"Great goodness!" ejaculated the disturbed Bob.

He thrilled all over. In that tree! What unique freak of fate had put him in this of all places?

What would the amazed plosters say when their ardent search resulted in unearthing—one of Nick Carter's detectives!

"It can't be in here," fluttered Bob. "Why not, though? The rope! Did it hold a box or parcel suspended, and has it rotted off or has some animal bitten it off? My foot went into something! I thought it was bark. Yes. No! Why, it's a box, rotted, broken, and—I've found the treasure!"

Bob felt like shouting the word—he was surprised, excited, dumfounded.

Half stooping, his fingers grazed just what he described.

Then they groped among powdery bark, dust, fragments of rope and pine, and then papers rustled.

One—two—three—four little packages of documents, bonds, stocks, he knew not what, but they certainly must comprise the hidden fortune. Every circumstance tallied minutely to that hypothesis.

The lawyer's voice sounded outside again:

"Well, get to work."

"What are you going to do?" asked Dennis.

"Raise a ladder."

"None around. You aren't thinking of getting at what's in the tree that way?"

"I am, it's hollow."

"Who'll go down?"

"That's so. What are we going to do?"

Bob felt a pardonable glow of exultation at having handled the hidden treasure first.

It was superseded by a chilling shock of dismay, however, at Dennis' next, ominous words:

"Get an axe!"

CHAPTER XI.

DYNAMITE!

Bob Ferret was startled, but he was not rattled.

The unexpected possession of the hidden treasure inspired him with a mighty resolve not to part with it readily.

"They are going to cut the tree down," he soliloquized, and as he spoke a dull clang vibrated.

Pluck to the last, grit to the core, Bob set his wits at work.

He stowed the papers in his breast and reascended the inside of the tree, with the help of the notches he had cut.

When he reached the rope he got a good hold on it and half-dangled, half braced himself.

He was now entirely beyond the possibility of any danger from the axe.

This cut through the thin wood of the tree trunk in a very few moments. There was a sharp creak and the tree swayed.

"It's going! Where will I be?" muttered Bob, grimly.

"Stand back!" he heard Dennis shout.

Then with a splitting crack the tree bent over, dropped and landed with a crash.

In falling Bob was shot forward, and a peculiar accident happened.

To his dismay he found himself held by the arms and shoulders in the narrowing bulge of the tree as tightly as if driven there—a human wedge.

He simply could not budge an inch, he was imprisoned helplessly.

"Now, then!" rang out the lawyer's excited voice.

A mighty scrambling echoed among the debris in the revealed tree trunk.

"Rope—a box, but broken," called out Dennis.

"Empty!" fairly howled the lawyer.

"Some one has been before us!" shouted Dennis. "Hold the lantern—what's that?"

It was Bob, and he saw him, or rather, Bob's feet, for the rays of the lantern shot up the cavity in which Bob was wedged.

"It's all up with me!" muttered Bob.

He felt his feet seized. There was a terrific wrench.

Bob got one hand into his breast, seized the papers, flung them beyond him into the hollow trunk, and came out head down.

"Who is it!" demanded the lawyer, eagerly.

Bob was righted, but firmly clutched, by three pairs of hands. The lantern was flared into his face.

"The boy with the apples——" began the lawyer.

"Hold! I know him," cried Dennis. "Rhodes, it's the same boy who bothered us in the city. Look at his eyes!"

"Yes, search him!"

Bob submitted to the rough process without making any special ado.

"Where is the stuff that was in that tree?" raved the lawyer.

"Why should I know?" demanded Bob, coolly.

"You do, you must know! Is this magic—his meeting us at every turn! Where is it? Where is it?"

The frantic lawyer put out his hands as if to clutch his prisoner by the throat and choke the truth out of him.

"I haven't got it," declared Bob.

"I'll make him tell——"

"Rhodes!"

In a shout Dennis distracted the lawyer's attention. He was pointing toward the camp-fire.

The servant and the elder Rhodes continued to hold Bob. The latter was as startled as Dennis and the lawyer, for the moment.

A new actor had appeared on the scene.

Plainly visible, coming toward them from the direction of the fire, was a man—James Singleton.

He held a small wooden box under his arm, and he was studying trees, bushes, all the ground about him as he advanced.

Bob was amazed. How had he got away from the city—how had he got here?

"Rhodes!" whispered Dennis, hoarsely, "it's Singleton!"

"Or his ghost!"

"Nonsense! See! he has a box! Can it be the treasure?"

Both started forward. Never looking up, Singleton approached, engrossed.

They grasped him suddenly. The man with the painted arm uttered a startled cry and tried to wrench free.

The lawyer tore the box from his grasp, Dennis dragged him toward the tree.

"Hold the boy," he ordered to the servant, "hold this man," he spoke to the elder Rhodes. "What is in it?" he continued, running back to where the lawyer was turning the box over and over in his hands.

"Do not open it! Do not open it——" began Singleton, but the two men ran toward the camp-fire eagerly.

They got a hatchet and began to pry up the cover of the box.

Abruptly the impatient lawyer gave the stubborn lid a kick.

Singleton had been struggling fiercely, utterly incoherent warnings all the time.

"Do not strike it!" he shouted.

Too late! As the hatchet descended a second time an awful boom rang out.

The appalled Bob saw a blur of mingled flash and form.

A shock that drove his captor's clutch free permeated the air.

"Dynamite!" panted Singleton.

With an awful shriek the elder Rhodes darted toward the spot where a moment before his son had been and now was not.

Then as he realized what had happened he reeled, threw up his arms and sank senseless to the ground.

The servant, white as death, tottered toward him, and stood gazing, pale and horrified, at a great hole in the ground where the explosion had taken place.

"Come!"

Bob Ferret could not afford to lose his wits, to take any risks.

He got the papers out of the hollow tree and grasped Singleton's arm.

The latter was babbling incoherently of Brazil, of treasures, of dynamite—snatches of real and imaginary things—but he went placidly along at Bob's guidance.

By the time they had reached the nearest farmhouse, Bob fancied he guessed the mystery of his strange appearance on the scene.

Nick Carter's doctor had operated on Singleton's head sufficient to help back his memory in part.

In some way Singleton must have escaped and had hurried hither, directed by half-clouded impulses.

He had purchased a stick of dynamite and had placed it in the box, with some vague idea that it might aid him in blowing up the tree to get at the treasure—a brain-sick man's phantasy—the explosion could be explained in no other way.

Bob got the farmer out of bed. He told him enough of the story of the tragedy of the night to enlist his interest and services.

Singleton was given in charge of one of his sons. The other, with the farmer, accompanied Bob back to the site of the explosion.

At noon the following day the newspapers of New York city told graphically what Nick Carter's young detective had accomplished in the case of the mystery of the painted arm.

Dennis and the lawyer had been blown to pieces, the father of the latter had received a shock from which he would never recover, the servant was in jail.

A raid was made on Red Jeff's haunt, but the famous king of the river pirates had fled, ridding the city merchant marine of one of its greatest pests.

The orphan sister of dead John Lester was found, and to her was given the fortune represented by the securities found by Bob in the old hollow tree.

Singleton was again placed in charge of Nick Carter's doctor, who had great hopes that by careful treatment within a month his reason would be completely restored.

Bob placed in Nick Carter's curiosity cabinet a few days later two ominous mementoes of his latest case.

One was the photograph of the painted arm, found at the scene of the explosion.

The other was the little ivory mallet, secured at the Greek doctor's office.

They were mute but eloquent reminders of one of the most perilous shadow trails ever followed by a member of Nick Carter's detective school.

THE END.

The next number of the Nick Carter Weekly will contain, "Nick Carter's Junior Force; or, The Man with Four Arms."

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